

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L MEXICO 8783

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PINS, MX

SUBJ: EXCELSIOR'S PROBLEMS: FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

REF: MEXICO 8735

1. SUMMARY: BATTLE LINES IN DISPUTE DESCRIBED REFTEL ARE BEING MORE SHARPLY DRAWN, WITH LAND INVADERS APPEALING DECISION OF AGRARIAN REFORM UPHOLDING EXCELSIOR POSITION, DISSIDENTS WITHIN EXCELSIOR COOPERATIVE STEPPING UP ATTACKS, AND EXCELSIOR GOING FURTHER IN JULY 8 OP-ED PAGE BY ALLEGING PROBLEM IS ATTACK ON FREEDOM OF THE PRESS. BUT EXCELSIOR IS BEING CAREFUL TO AVOID A COLLISION COURSE WITH THE GOM, EVEN SUGGESTING THAT THE ATTACK IS INDIRECTLY DESIGNED TO DISCREDIT THE GOM'S IMAGE OF SUPPORTING PRESS FREEDOM. IF ECHEVERRIA IS BEHIND EXCELSIOR'S PROBLEMS, WHY HE SHOULD BE TAKING SUCH DRASTIC MEASURES IS DIFFICULT QUESTION. WE FIND HARD TO ACCEPT THAT MERE ANNOYANCE WITH EXCELSIOR'S INDEPENDENCE IS THE SOLE REASON AND SPECULATE ON TWO ADDITION, POSSIBLE MOTIVATIONS. END SUMMARY.

2. REF REPORTED THAT INFLUENTIAL DAILY EXCELSIOR WAS CONFRONTED WITH TWO PROBLEMS: A LAND INVASION OF URBAN PROPERTY IT BOUGHT AND DEVELOPED IN THE FEDERAL DISTRICT AND ATTACKS BY MEMBERS OF THE EXCELSIOR COOPERATIVE THAT EXCELSIOR MANAGE-
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MENT HAD BEEN LESS THAN HONEST IN HANDLING THAT LAND DEAL

AND OTHER MATTERS ENTRUSTED TO IT. WE SPECULATED THAT THE TWO PROBLEMS COULD BE EVIDENCE OF A GOM (I.E. PRESIDENT ACTING THROUGH TOP SECURITY AIDES) DETERMINATION TO BRING TO HEEL THE INDEPENDENT MINDED DIRECTOR OF EXCELSIOR, JULIO SCHERER GARCIA.

3. ON JULY 8 MEXICO CITY PRESS CARRIED ADS AND POLITICAL COLUMNS WITH THESE NEW DEVELOPMENTS:

A) THE LAND INVADERS HAVE APPEALED TO THE FEDERAL DISTRICT COURTS THE DECISION OF THE AGRARIAN REFORM SECRETARIAT UPHOLDING LEGALITY OF EXCELSIOR'S PURCHASE OF THE PROPERTY;

B) THE DISSIDENT MEMBERS OF EXCELSIOR WERE GIVEN AMPLE TIME NIGHT OF JULY 7 ON POPULAR COMMENTATOR JACOBO ZABLUDOVSKY'S "TWENTY FOUR HOURS" PROGRAM TO CRITICIZE SCHERER GARCIA AND OTHER EXCELSIOR MANAGEMENT AND ON JULY 8 RAN FULL PAGE AD IN NOVEDADES REPEATING THOSE ATTACKS AND URGING HIGH ATTENDANCE BY COOPERATIVE MEMBERS AT MEETING TO BE HELD TODAY, JULY 8. AS THIS IS BEING DRAFTED, WE HAVE RECEIVED REPORTS THAT DISSIDENT MEMBERS AT COOPERATIVE MEETING ARE ARMED AND WILL SEEK A DECISION TO REMOVE SCHERER GARCIA AND HIS TOP AIDES;

C) EXCELSIOR RAN EDITORIAL GOING SOMEWHAT FARTHER THAN JULY 7 EDITORIAL HINTING POLITICAL MOTIVATION FOR LAND INVASION BY SUGGESTING THAT FREEDOM OF THE PRESS WAS AT STAKE. HOWEVER, EXCELSIOR DID NOT SUGGEST WHO WISHED TO SEE ITS INDEPENDENCE CURBED;

D) FOUR COLUMNISTS IN EXCELSIOR SUPPORTED SCHERER GARCIA IN PIECES ALLEGING POLITICAL MOTIVATIONS FROM "OBSCURE FORCES, DIFFICULT TO NAME, TO VERIFY". SEVERAL TOOK THE TACK THAT THE ATTACKS ON EXCELSIOR WERE DE FACTO ATTACKS ON THE PRESIDENT HIMSELF, TO DISCREDIT A REGIME WHICH HAS PROMOTED FREEDOM OF THE PRESS;

E) THE COOPERATIVE OF GRAPHIC ARTS WORKERS OF THE FEDERAL DISTRICT SUPPORTED EXCELSIOR IN A PAID AID:

F) THE SECRETARY OF AGRARIAN REFORM, FELIX BARRA GARCIA, CONFIDENTIAL

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REITERATED CONVICITIO OF HIS AGENCY THAT EXCELSIOR LEGAL POSITION ON PURCHASE OF PROPERTY WAS VALID BUT DISCLAIMED RESPONSIBILITY FOR DISLODGING SQUATTERS;

G) LEFTIST WRITER, INTELLECTUAL, AND MEMBER OF THE ADVISORY COUNCIL TO THE PRI'S IEPES (THINK TANK) FERNANDO BENITEZ, PUBLISHED LETTER IN EXCELSIOR JULY 8 BLAMING PRI CONGRESSIONAL CANDIDATE (ELECTED JULY 4) HUMBERTO SERRANO FOR LAND INVASION AND THREATENING TO RESIGN HIS POSITION IF PRI DID NOT CANCEL

HIS RESITRATION. (EXCELSIOR IN ITS JULY 7 EDITORIAL ALSO NAMED SERRANO, LONG AN ACTIVIST IN RURAL SECTOR, AS HAD EARLIER REPORTS IN EXCELSIOR. SERRANO HAD DENIED THE CHARGE AND ISSUED A GENEAL STATEMENT SAYING INJUSTICES IN LAND TENANCY SHOULD NOT BE CORRECTED OUTSIDE THE LAW); AND

H) LAST PAGE OF FIRST SECTION IN EXCELSIOR WAS PRINTED BLANK. ACCORDING TO A FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT HERE, SPACE WAS FOR FULL PAGE AD BY EXCELSIOR WHICH WAS NOT RUN AFTER VIOLENT THREATS WERE RECEIVED BY PRESSMEN.

4. COMMENT: EXCELSIOR THUS FAR HAS CONTINUED TO IGNORE ATTACKS ON SCHERER FROM WITHIN THE COOPERATIVE AND HAS CONCENTRATED INSTEAD ON THE POLITICAL MOTIVATION OF THE LAND INVASION. BY SUGGESTING THAT THE LAND INVASION IS AN ATTACK ON PRESS FREEDOM WHOSE INTENT IS TO DISCREDIT THE ECHEVERRIA ADMINISTRATION, EXCELSIOR COLUMNISTS (SURELY WITH SCHERER'S APPROVAL) NICELY AVOID PUTTING THEMSELVES ON A COLLISION COURSE WITH THE PRESIDENT HIMSELF. EXCELSIOR THUS SEEMS DETERMINED TO RESIST THE ATTACKS BUT WITHOUT FINGERING THE PRESIDENT OR ANYONE CLOSELY CONNECTED WITH HIM.

5. WHY SHOULD THE PRESIDENT WISH TO ATTACK EXCELSIOR? THE CONFIDENTIAL REPORT (SEE REF) ATTRIBUTES TO THE PRESIDENT A BELIEVE THAT EXCELSIOR HAS BROKEN THE "UNWRITTEN RULES OF THE GAME" IN ATTACKING THE PRESIDENT, GOM IN GENERAL, THE PRI, AND PRESIDENT-ELECT LOPEZ PORTILLO. EXCELSIOR DID ENGAGE IN A POLEMIC IN FEBRUARY 1975 WITH THEN TREASURY SECRETARY LOPEZ PORTILLO, WHICH AT THE TIME WAS BELIEVED TO HAVE "BURNED" JLP'S CHANCES FOR THE PRI PRESIDENTIAL NOMINATION, AND COLUMNIST GASTON GARCIA CANTU (WHO IN 1969 WAS A CLOSE ALLY, ALONG WITH LOPEZ PORTILLO HIMSELF, OF ECHEVERRIA'S MAIN RIVAL FOR THE PRESIDENCY, EMILIO MARTINEZ
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MANATOU) DID DESCRIBE JLP'S NOMINATION AS A BETRAYAL OF WORKER AND CAMPESINO INTERESTS. EXCELSIOR HAS ALSO BEEN AMONG THE LIVELIEST AND MOST INDEPENDENT OF MEXICO CITY NEWS-PAPERS BUT CRITICIZES GOM ACTIONS IN WAYS WHICH WE WOULD HAVE THOUGHT WERE WITHIN ACCEPTABLE LIMITS. IT NEVER CRITICIZES THE PRESIDENT DIRECTLY. WE THEREFORE FIND DIFFICULT TO ACCEPT PRESIDENTIAL ANNOYANCE OVER EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE AS THE SINGLE REASON FOR THE ATTACKS ON EXCELSIOR.

6. ANOTHER EXPLANATION COULD RELATE TO THE PRESIDENT'S OWN JOURNALISTIC AMBITIONS. HE IS BELIEVED TO HAVE PURCHASED A CONTROLLING INTEREST IN TWO MEXICO CITY NEWSPAPERS (EL SOL AND EL UNIVERSAL) WHOSE COMBINED INFLUENCE PROBABLY DOES NOT EQUAL EXCELSIOR'S AND SO MAY BE ATTEMPTING TO ATTACK THE OPPOSITION WHILE HE STILL HAS AVAILABLE THE POWER AND SECURITY

APPARATUS TO DO SO. ANOTHER POSSIBILITY, ALSO PURELY SPECULATIVE, IS THAT THE EXCELSIOR DISPUTE IS SOMEHOW CONNECTED WITH THE RECENTLY REVEALED TAX EVASION SCANDALS (SEE MEXICO 8583), WHICH COULD POSSIBLY REACH CLOSE TO THE PRESIDENT HIMSELF. WHETHER EITHER OF THESE TWO POSSIBILITIES IS NEAR THE MARK OR NOT, WE SUSPECT THAT SOMETHING MORE THAN MERE ANNOYANCE WITH EXCELSIOR'S INDEPENDENCE IS AMONG THE MOTIVATING FACTORS.

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